

Review Essay: The True Story Behind the Movie “*The Courier*”

Directed by Dominic Cooke, screenplay by Tom O’Connor, 2020, 112 min.

Reviewed by Randy P. Burkett

The spy thriller *The Courier*, starring Benedict Cumberbatch as English businessman Greville Wynne and Merab Ninidze as Oleg Penkovskiy, Soviet military intelligence (GRU) officer turned spy for the West in the 1960s, is an enjoyable film that should have the caveat “based on true events” continuously running at the bottom of the screen. The two leading actors do a wonderful job of portraying their real-life characters, and Cumberbatch is particularly outstanding in capturing the slightly sleazy traveling salesman Wynne, who becomes embroiled in one of the most important espionage stories of the 20th century.

However, intelligence practitioners will wonder at some of the choices the writer and director made when they decided to explore the relationship between Wynne and Penkovskiy, especially in light of the numerous books and films that have more accurately told Penkovskiy’s story, including his interactions with CIA and MI6 handlers in Moscow.^a

Another bit of artistic license was creating CIA officer Emily Donovan, played by an energetic Rachel Brosnahan. Donovan is fast-talking, confident CIA officer who bears more than a passing resemblance to Brosnahan’s Miriam “Midge” Maisel on Amazon Prime’s hit series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, as if Donovan had been plucked from doing stand-up comedy and made into a CIA officer. Both Maisel and Donovan are set in the early 1960s; one might wonder if Brosnahan brought her wardrobe and hairstylist directly from one set to the other.

The Donovan character adds some contemporary sparkle to the cast, which otherwise would be mostly male and mostly drab. The only other women introduced in the film are Wynne’s wife Sheila (Jessie Buckley) and Penkovskiy’s wife Vera (Mariya Mironova). However, in creating Donovan, filmwriter Tom O’Connor and director Dominic Cooke doom to obscurity a real-life intelligence operative who played a vital role in the Penkovskiy case:

Janet Chisholm, wife of the British head of station (HOS, akin to a CIA chief of station) in Moscow.

Handling Penkovskiy

As Donovan and her MI6 counterpart Dickie Franks (played by Angus Wright) deftly explain when recruiting Wynne, Penkovskiy must have a means of getting his information out of the Soviet Union and someone who can resupply him with espionage gear, such as film for his Minox camera, so that he can keep producing vital intelligence. Janet Chisolm, not Greville Wynne, filled that role.

Starting on July 2, 1961, Janet Chisholm was the smiling, reassuring face for Penkovskiy inside Moscow who received his exposed film and passed him new supplies; she was the one who listened to his hopes and complaints in brief meetings in apartment vestibules in October–December of that year; and she is the person Penkovskiy confided in when he told her on May 31, 1962, that he needed to defect soon. This meeting, which took place inside the British Embassy at an event to honor the Queen’s birthday, was the last time Janet and Penkovskiy would see each other.

The Chisolms left Moscow on July 14, 1962, after Penkovskiy had been met by his new CIA handler Rodney Carlson. Carlson wore a unique tie-pin as a recognition signal for Penkovskiy, an act portrayed in the movie as a way for Penkovskiy to understand Wynne is connected to Western intelligence. No explanation is given as to who picked the design or came up with the signal plan. Perhaps the writers, director, and producer thought that including Janet Chisolm would muddy the story.

Cumberbatch’s depiction of Wynne being pitched to help MI6 and CIA and his range of emotions—from excitement and exhilaration to fear and despair—are some of the highlights of the film. Some of these reactions were probably accurate, but the shock of the spy world being

a. Details in this review are drawn from *The Penkovskiy Case* and *The Penkovskiy Papers*. See the final section, Further Readings, for more information.

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completely new to Wynne and his importance as the case unfolds are highly exaggerated.

In reality, Penkovskiy had decided he and his family would defect from the Soviet Union as early as January 1959, and he started then to collect Soviet intelligence information that he would trade for a new life in the West. He spotted two US students, Eldon Ray Cox and Henry Lee Cobb, on a train in Moscow on August 9, 1960, and decided to approach them with some of the materials he had stolen. He saw Cox and Cobb again, crossing the Moskvoretsky Bridge three days later, not in the Moscow subway as imagined in *The Courier*.

Penkovskiy asked them to take two envelopes to the US embassy. One provided information on the shoot-downs of the U-2 spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers and another US military aircraft. The second had his letter volunteering to spy for the West, information on dead drops and signal sites around Moscow, and a clipped photograph of himself with US Army Col. Charles Peeke, a military attaché whom Penkovskiy had met in Turkey in 1956. It also detailed the names and assignments of the GRU class members who would complete their training in 1963.

The movie shows Penkovskiy as a successful officer with at least a nodding acquaintance with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. In real life, Penkovskiy's career had a promising start but was already on shaky ground when he made the decision to approach the US students. He had been a highly respected and decorated artillery officer in the Red Army during World War II and had made connections with key Soviet officials, including future Col. Gen. Sergey Sergeyeovich Varentsov, who in 1961 became Chief Marshal of Artillery and Commander of the Soviet Artillery Rocket Forces.

Promoted to lieutenant colonel, Penkovskiy, 26, married Vera, 17, daughter of Lt. Gen. Dmitriy Gapanovich in 1945. She moved into his Moscow apartment which he had shared with his mother since 1941. The following year, they had a daughter named Galina, the inspiration for the movie character Nina (Emma Penzia).

Penkovskiy attended the famed Frunze Military Academy and after graduation was offered the chance to go directly to the GRU Military Diplomatic Academy (MDA), although he first served for a year with troops as

his father-in-law had advised. He began his GRU career working as the Egypt desk officer after graduating in 1953.

In July 1955, Penkovskiy went to Ankara, Turkey, as assistant military attaché and GRU deputy resident (akin to deputy COS). He was elevated to acting military attaché and acting resident for six months after he arrived, but he was then replaced in both positions by KGB officers.

Penkovskiy had frequent conflicts with his new KGB colleagues, made worse by an alleged affair with the deputy resident's wife. His friction with the KGB came to a head when Penkovskiy anonymously alerted the Turkish authorities to one of the KGB officer's activities and the officer was detained. This resulted in Penkovskiy's recall to Moscow in November 1956, although there was no proof Penkovskiy sabotaged the KGB officer. His career was in limbo for the next two years until Colonel General Varentsov arranged for him to become a student at the artillery academy in Moscow, where students of artillery and rocket/missile forces were trained.

By that point, Penkovskiy was disgruntled and determined to defect with his family if he got the chance. He used his eight months at the academy to transcribe 1,500 pages of data on Soviet rockets and missiles, which he hid at his uncle's dacha. This technical data, coupled with the thousands of photographs of Soviet military manuals he would later take, comprised the bulk of the information the United States would need to have an upper hand in the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962.

Penkovskiy returned to GRU duties in May 1959 and was assigned to be an instructor at the MDA, which gave him access to the details on Soviet military intelligence officers in training that he passed to Cox and Cobb. Penkovskiy was unhappy babysitting MDA trainees, however, and arranged a transfer to the State Scientific and Technical Committee in November 1960. He was supposed to handle Western delegations coming to the USSR and obtain scientific and technical secrets. This assignment would allow him some opportunities to travel outside the Soviet Union, although he would still be barred from being posted overseas with his family.

Penkovskiy first met Greville Wynne the following month. Wynne was not the innocent neophyte depicted in the film. He was already an MI6 contact, had provided reports to the British service based on his business contacts,

and like all visiting Westerners had been watched by the KGB on his many previous visits.

The Courier suggests all spy business is conducted in regular restaurants over lunch. But it was Penkovskiy who approached Wynne to be his go-between with the Western intelligence services in April 1961. Penkovskiy convinced a reluctant Wynne to carry a large package of papers back to the British Embassy for him. Wynne hesitated. He knew it was one thing to share information with MI6 that he picked up in the normal course of business but that it much more dangerous to get caught carrying Soviet secrets. However, Penkovskiy was persuasive and Wynne was drawn further into the operation.

Wynne not only brought the Penkovskiy papers to the British, he also let them know Penkovskiy would be coming to England with a Soviet delegation very soon. CIA and MI6 officials met to discuss how to contact the elusive Penkovskiy, who had reached out to each organization more than once through Western businessmen and students when the papers arrived on April 13, 1961. They decided to handle the case jointly.

Wynne acted as the host for Penkovskiy's and his delegation when they arrived in London on April 20, 1961. CIA and MI6 booked rooms in the Mount Royal Hotel where the group was housed. Penkovskiy finally met the CIA and MI6 professionals he had been trying to contact for eight months: CIA officers George Kisevalter and Joe Bulik and MI6 officers Michael Stokes and Harold Shergold.

The group would meet 17 times during this trip for a total of 52 hours. Penkovskiy showed up with several pounds of documents copied from the Dzerzhinsky academy, information about the GRU (including the identities of two GRU officers in London), details of military targets, locations of KGB installations, and other data. He also brought a large shopping list for his family and friends. This shopping list was filled by other CIA support officers while the operational meetings were conducted, providing Penkovskiy a cover story for his absences. In addition to being debriefed, Penkovskiy was trained on the Minox camera and other tradecraft and was given a communications plan.

After the debriefings, he would return to his room late at night with his large shopping bags full of decadent Western consumer goods. Penkovskiy could not carry all

the items he had purchased, which gave Wynne an excuse to deliver some on his trips to Russia and Penkovskiy a reason to have Wynne waved past the customs inspectors.

Penkovskiy would use these gifts to meet with his senior friends and listen to their complaints about Khrushchev. *The Courier* omits this important aspect of the case and invents Penkovskiy having direct access to senior Soviet leaders and secrets.

Wynne was not involved in Penkovskiy's debriefing, but he continued to play a vital role. He made another trip to Moscow in May 1961, carrying some more of Penkovskiy's shopping with him along with a second Minox camera, 60 rolls of film, and instructions for contacting Janet Chisholm at a playground near the Chisholms' apartment. He brought photographs of Janet and her three children and a candy box for passing film.

KGB agents photographed Wynne entering the Chisholm's apartment, and they were well aware of Roderick's position as MI6 HOS because George Blake, a KGB spy inside MI6, had compromised him years before. The KGB might have brought these photos to the GRU's attention but they were assured that Penkovskiy had recruited Wynne to get Western industrial information; Wynne was his spy.

Regardless, the KGB missed the first meeting between Janet Chisholm and Penkovskiy at the playground on July 2, 1961, where he passed her seven rolls of film—350 photos in all—and two typed pages of notes. Three weeks later, Penkovskiy was back in London. This time he was leading another Soviet trade delegation and playing tour guide for the wife and daughter of his boss, Gen. Ivan Servov, head of the GRU. He met with his handlers 14 times during this trip for a total of 47 hours.

The Courier alludes to his productivity by showing more and more CIA employees at work translating documents and transcribing tapes. Penkovskiy provided the first photographs of the top secret version of the journal *Voyennaya Mysl'* (*Military Thought*) and other documents from the GRU classified library during these meetings. He did not risk trying to bring the paper copies of these documents, as shown in the movie, because they were closely controlled.

The Courier adds dramatic tension by showing Penkovskiy moving among library racks, snapping photos

of various documents. In reality, each document had to be requested from the librarian and then signed out by Penkovskiy, who fortuitously still had access as a student and writer. He would photograph the documents in one of several small offices and return them to the librarian.

Wynne returned to Moscow in late August 1961, lugging more of Penkovskiy's purchases, and was photographed by the KGB returning his suitcase on the steps of the Ukraina Hotel. Apparently, this did not worry the KGB too much, and Penkovskiy was allowed to travel to Paris the following month. He was officially met by Wynne and covertly debriefed by the CIA and MI6 team on a dozen occasions. During this trip, the team made plans to cut Wynne out entirely and rely only on Janet for brief encounters every other week, alternating between two locations until a CIA officer was in place.

Growing Suspicions

Around this same time, Penkovskiy's material was starting to draw dangerous attention. In September 1961, *Washington Post* writer Joseph Alsop reported the United States was drastically lowering its estimates of Soviet ICBMs. Lots of loose talk circulated at State, CIA, and the Pentagon about a hot new Russian source, and, adding to the danger, the Soviets had a their own penetration at the National Security Agency—Jack Dunlap—who saw some of the material Penkovskiy had provided.^a

Wynne was not yet cut out, and he remained a vital contact for Penkovskiy. However, the strain of living a double life was clear when the pair next met on July 3, 1962. Penkovskiy knew Wynne's hotel room at the Ukraina Hotel was bugged and tried to take some precautions, as shown in the movie, by turning on the radio, but he then broke down, distraught over his fear of being caught. Evidently, the KGB officers listening in were either not fooled by the radio or might have even been alerted by this tactic.

Either way, the KGB searched Wynne's room that night and photographed a shaving cream can with a false bottom (in *The Courier* the concealment device is a large can of cleaning supplies in a public bathroom). Wynne was shaken by the encounter and met with Roderick Chisholm the same day.

Penkovskiy was right to be scared. He and Wynne agreed to have dinner at the Peking Hotel on July 5, but Penkovskiy spotted surveillance, brought Wynne into an alley, and told him to leave Moscow as soon as he could.

Penkovskiy had now lost both Janet and Wynne, but he did have his new CIA contact, Rodney Carlson. Penkovskiy's final intelligence contribution occurred on August 27, 1962. He passed material to Carlson in a bathroom at a party for a US tobacco delegation, including 600 pages of photographed documents, and received a false internal passport that he would need to move himself and his family to a location where they could be exfiltrated.

Contrary to the *The Courier* version, Wynne was not involved, and CIA made no real attempt to get the family out. Scenes of visiting CIA officer Donovan, with no experience in Moscow, preparing to ferry Penkovskiy and his family in a van across hundreds of miles through the Warsaw Pact to safety in the West are absurd.

KGB Closes In

Penkovskiy was out of time. He attended a final event at the British Embassy on September 6, 1962. The new MI6 HOS, Gervaise Cowell, attended wearing the recognition tieclip. His wife, Pamela, was supposed to replace Janet as an additional inside contact. Penkovskiy met both Gervaise and Pamela, but no operational exchanges occurred. That was the last time Penkovskiy was seen before his trial.

The KGB had been suspicious for some time but had held off in arresting Penkovskiy to determine if he was working alone or if higher ranking officers, such as Gen. Servov, were involved. The KGB poisoned Penkovskiy on September 7, 1962, took him to hospital, and searched his apartment. They found his camera and internal passport in a special drawer in his desk, as shown in the movie. He was arrested soon after and interrogated.

Penkovskiy revealed the details of his deaddrop arrangements, and the KGB set up an ambush. Carlson, however, was not available because he was with his wife, who had recently had a baby, so CIA officer Richard Carl Jacob went to service the dead drop. The KGB ambushed him at the site.

a. Joseph Alsop, "Facts About the Missile Balance," *Washington Post*, September 25, 1961.

On the same day, Wynne was arrested in Budapest by the Hungarians, not by the Soviets as portrayed in *The Courier*, and packed off to Moscow. Wynne and Penkovskiy were tried together in early May 1963, but they never had the touching scene where Wynne could tell Penkovskiy he had prevented a nuclear war. Penkovskiy was sentenced to death and executed on May 16, 1963. Wynne was given eight years in prison but was exchanged on April 22, 1964, for Konon Molody, better known as Gordon Lonsdale, a Soviet illegal imprisoned in England.

Cuban Missile Crisis

The Courier alters Penkovskiy's timeline to use the Cuban Missile Crisis to increase the suspense surrounding this case. However, Penkovskiy was arrested and imprisoned before this crisis broke in October 1962. He did not turn over the locations of the missiles, nor did he have the direct relationship with Khrushchev as the film depicts. Penkovskiy's access to leadership plans and intentions only came through his network of people like Servov and Varentsov.

Still, Penkovskiy can legitimately be considered as the spy who saved the world from nuclear war. On December 23, 1961, Penkovskiy passed Janet Chisholm important information about the threats Khrushchev had made to President Kennedy over Berlin during their summit in Vienna on June 4, 1961. Tensions were high over the construction of the Berlin Wall that had begun in August, but Penkovskiy reported Khrushchev was not nearly as confident as he tried to appear and was not ready to go to war with the West. This reporting made its way to Kennedy.

In 1962, after reports from human agents and aerial reconnaissance indicated the Soviets were fielding nuclear missiles in Cuba, Kennedy decided to allow U-2 overflights of Cuba to resume. The resulting imagery was then combined with Penkovskiy's intelligence trove to enable US analysts say with certainty what weapons were being installed and when the missiles would be operational. Kennedy's trust in Penkovskiy's reporting, the analysts, and the U-2 imagery gave him the confidence to order a

blockade of Cuba rather than launching airstrikes or an invasion and risking escalation.

Like many films about espionage, *The Courier* takes dramatic license and gets many of the details wrong, but it gets the most important point right: Oleg Penkovskiy, with the help of his CIA and MI6 handlers, might well have prevented Armageddon.

Further Reading

In 1964, CIA offices created *The Penkovskiy Memoirs* using tapes of all 45 meetings with Oleg Penkovskiy. The first draft was written in Russian by Peter Deryabin with the assistance of the case officers and other CIA employees who ran Penkovskiy and translated the tapes of his meetings. *Memoirs* was published as *The Penkovskiy Papers* credited to Oleg Penkovskiy. Frank Gibney, who wrote for *Time* and *Life* magazines, provided extensive commentary, and Peter Deriabin [sic] was listed as the "translator."

The reported origins as Penkovskiy's diary was a cover story—he never kept any kind of diary—but the substance was true. CIA officials expected the Soviets would claim it was a provocative fabrication and decided to stay wholly with the information that Penkovskiy provided, even when he was in error about some facts.

In April 1976, during congressional investigation of CIA activities, the CIA admitted it had produced the book; it publicly revealed its role in 1992. For background, see David Murphy, Memorandum for Deputy Director (Plans), "Request Approval to Publish the Penkovskiy Memoirs," November 6, 1964, and "Foreign and Military Intelligence, Book 1, Final Report of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities," United States Senate, April 14, 1976, declassified on March 2, 2011.

Leonard McCoy, who was actively involved in the operation, wrote *The Penkovskiy Case*; it was approved for release on September 20, 2014. Penkovskiy's story has figured in several other books, including Wynne's account, *Contact on Gorky Street*; *CIA Spymaster*, by Clarence Ashley; *Codename Hero*, by Jeremy Duns; and *The Spy Who Saved the World*, by Jerrold Schecter.



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